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A HIGH-SCHOOL COURSE IN PERIODICAL LITERATURE¹

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The essay has always been the stumbling-block in high-school literature teaching. Year after year we accompany the Spectator on his mildly exhilarating trip to Coverley Hall, and Geoffrey Crayon, Gent., on his imitation of it we shatter with ruthless analysis the exquisite paradoxes of Elia, or perhaps dare to tackle "Warren Hastings," or "A Piece of Chalk," thanking the higher powers that it is no longer a question of the Dream Fugue or the Tartar Tribe. And then our reluctant and almost rebellious pupils clamor for a novel.

The whole business of the essay, as known in high schools, seems totally unrelated to anything going on now; to be a matter of eighteenth-century moralists and nineteenth-century stylists whose appeal is to the cultured few—certainly not to the schoolboy at large. To relate this important body of literature to our daily life, to bring it forward as a standard for similar writings of today, the Horace Mann School is attempting a course in periodical literature. Following the general plan of the course in drama, described in an earlier number of this *Journal*,¹ we have tried to parallel each classic read, with its modern counterpart; starting, indeed, when practicable, with the more modern form. We have included, as well as certain standard essays, a study of newspapers, both daily and weekly; of the monthly magazines; and of contemporary essayists, from Mr. Crothers to "Mr. Dooley." Students have written news items, editorials, personal essays, long articles, or reviews; and, as an essential part of this last task, have had practical instruction in library reference work.

The course, which for the sake of continuity and culminative effect has run through a half-year, began with the newspaper.

¹ See the *English Journal* for February, 1913.

Each student brought to class any daily he pleased—they ranged from the conservative *Evening Post* to the Hearst papers and the *Call* (Socialist) and included an occasional German or Italian sheet. With the help of such books as Ross's *The Writing of News*, we studied the general makeup of the paper; the headlines; the stressing of different kinds of news in different papers; positions of emphasis on the page, etc. We took up the gathering of the news; the work of the Associated Press, of the reporter; of the special correspondent; of the rewrite man and city editor; good and bad features of news writing; the color that different papers give the same piece of news by style, emphasis, headlines. Editorials were taken up in much the same way; discriminated from news items, compared as to tone, point of view, class of readers addressed; and analyzed for structure and style. The class meanwhile were writing news items and editorials of their own, based chiefly on school events, and looking toward the oncoming election of editors for the school paper. Topics for individual reports were assigned to cover special departments—dramatic, musical, and literary criticism; fashions; the “new” woman's page; market reports; and a group of pupils gave a highly interesting reflectoscope talk on cartoons.

The development of journalism in other countries, and its history, was worked out through accessible encyclopedias; and this study led at once to the *Spectator*. The class was asked to imagine all the papers it had been studying buried for two centuries, and then dug up; how much of our daily New York life could be reconstructed from them? This was to be the attitude of the class toward the *Spectator*, which was studied less as the beginning of fiction than as the beginning of journalism. We discussed the class of readers, the consequent attitude of the writers, their urbanity, their contemporary influence, their interest for us as reflecting the manners of a past age. This was illustrated further by pictures from Hogarth, by readings from Dobson, and by other material bearing on the eighteenth century. There was composition writing of the usual kind, and quite unexpectedly there arose at the expense of two boys who tried to keep their identity secret, a “Horace Mann Spectator,” which weekly hit off the foibles of the school in

a style passibly Addisonian. This sheet aroused much interest, the authorship being attributed popularly to every known writer in the school (including three of the English teachers); and it still flourishes, having offered recently a gold medal for the best essay imitating a Queen Anne writer.

The next aspect of the work was the monthly magazine, studied chiefly with reference to its serious information articles; fiction being postponed to another term. We discussed, on a comparative basis, the makeup of a number of leading magazines; the question of separation of "ads" from reading matter; illustration, in its various processes, as woodcuts, halftones, color-printing; the specialties of various magazines, such as the stressing of public affairs, of reform, of history, of art; or the particular body of readers addressed. This exercise was decidedly broadening; one boy said, "I'll bring the *Atlantic* to class, but you can't get me to read any of it," and ended by finding four articles well worth his trouble. We also attempted to look up the history of the standard magazines, and to find out which of them have brought forward writers of real importance.

In connection with the magazine work came the study of Macaulay's "Lord Clive" and "Warren Hastings," essays chosen partly because they were on the college list, and partly because they profess to be magazine popularizations of important subject-matter at that time little known, and supposed dry. We studied them less for the history than for the manner of handling; bringing out Macaulay's rich background of miscellaneous information; his rigid exclusion of dull matter, and his seizure of a few salient features for big "effects"; his use of local color, of contrast, of dramatic crisis; his ready—often ill-founded, but none the less positive—moral judgments; his clear analysis and obvious "ticketing" of each step in the thought.

The class at the same time undertook the preparation of articles of their own, based on pretty thorough library work. Each chose a subject for popular treatment, the only restrictions being that it be one not too well known to the class already, and that it have a literature accessible to the writer in the libraries of the school, the university, or the city. All manner of subjects were chosen, ranging

ing from Hats, and Dry-Fly Fishing to The Nebular Hypothesis, and Socialism. Each student first looked up his subject in two encyclopedias, and presented a brief summary of what he found. He was then taught how to use the *Readers' Guide*, and the other magazine indexes, and prepared a card bibliography of his subject for the last five years, indicating those magazines that were in the libraries at his command. He was then expected to find the standard book or books on the subject; and finally to prepare not a digest, but a thoroughly well-informed popularization of his topic. Various difficulties came up; some needed to have the field of their study narrowed, some broadened; some could find no standard books, or no recent discussion; and the task was a pretty searching ordeal for some students, especially the type of girl who is accustomed to getting A's in English on her imagination and fluency—it was of course proportionately rewarding to the boy who can make up in hard work and common-sense for what he may lack in literary grace. On the whole, it was well worth while; many of the essays were very readable, and all showed a gain in ability to collect and systematize information. The pupils regarded them as much more important than the ordinary run of compositions, and showed that regard in unusual care as to form, in well-chosen illustrations, and in some cases, in attempts to imitate the more desirable qualities of Macaulay's style.

The brief remainder of the term was spent as the teacher of each division thought best. The most advanced section took up the *Essays of Elia*, from the point of view of the expression of personality through style. The class work was very informal, as seemed appropriate to the subject; it consisted chiefly in having different pupils pick out what they considered good things—witticisms, bits of wisdom, of self-revelation, of insight into character, of apt phrasing. Any edition was allowed, but pupils were advised to get the charming Dent edition, one of the few books in which the illustrations catch the spirit of the text. Slowly the class gained a very real appreciation of Lamb's personality—his pathos and his courage, as well as his humor; and of the whimsicality and sweetness of his style. Collateral reading followed the list below, ranging at the pleasure of the pupil from the standard essays to

contemporary work. Composition writing followed the outside reading. Leigh Hunt's "Now, Descriptive of a Hot Day" was read to the class as a preparation for a short theme descriptive of cold, or rain, or gloom, or terror—some emotional state built up by an accumulation of many circumstantial details; or a passage from Hartt's "The People at Play" was used similarly.

The final note was on the personal letter, especially the vacation letter, a matter of immediate consequence, as school was about closing for the summer. A few of Stevenson's letters were read, with a view to bringing out the charm of personality even in correspondence on matter of fact subjects, or even when the subject of the letter may be far from pleasant. The last paper was a personal letter to a real or imagined friend.

Among both students and teachers, the course just described naturally provoked comparison with the course in drama of the preceding semester. Naturally, the subject-matter was not so enthralling; no other English work can hope to be so enthralling as the drama, studied in the height of the New York season. The essay is to high-school pupils perhaps the least interesting of literary types (with a possible reservation in favor of lyric poetry); and the particular essays on the college list, to which we in the East are in a measure tied, are not wildly exciting. It has seemed, however, that this method of approach put more life and spirit into the work, and secured a number of collateral results, not the least of which was training in library research. It is only fair to add that some teachers in the department question the desirability of holding a class to essays for a whole semester; and the work on Macaulay went pretty heavily. Possibly it would be worth trying to divide the year into thirds, rather than halves, so providing for a shift of subject at somewhat shorter intervals, without returning to the scrappy type of course that is a mere miscellany. The expressed judgment of the students was that in the essay, as in the drama, much is gained by concentration.

A SUGGESTIVE LIST OF ESSAYS

Alcott: Hospital Sketches
Aldrich: Ponkapog Papers
Bolles: Land of the Lingering Snow; To the North of Bearcamp Water
Briggs: School, College, and Character
Burroughs: Wake Robin; Winter Sunshine
Crothers: The Gentle Reader; The Pardoner's Wallet; By the Christmas Fire
Curtis: Prue and I
Dunn: Mr. Dooley (any volume)
Emerson: Friendship
Graham: Dream Days; The Golden Age
Hubbard: A Message to Garcia
Holmes: Autocrat of the Breakfast Table; Over the Teacups
Hunt: Essays (e.g., Graces and Anxieties of Pig-Driving; Spring and Daisies; Walks Home by Night; "Now, Descriptive of a Cold Day")
Irving: Sketch Book; Bracebridge Hall
Jerome: Three Men in a Boat
Mitchell: Dream Life; Reveries of a Bachelor
Shute: The Real Diary of a Real Boy
Stevenson: Memories and Portraits (e.g., The Character of Dogs; The English Admirals; Gossip on a Novel of Dumas)
Stewart: Essays on the Spot (e.g., The Story of Bully; Chicago Spiders)
Thoreau: Walden
Van Dyke: Little Rivers; Fisherman's Luck
Warner: Being a Boy; Backlog Studies